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Watch Out For Children: Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* in the 1950s

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Abstract

Watch Out For Children: Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* in the 1950s

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When *Peanuts* debuted in American newspapers at the end of 1950, it entered a world of optimistic postwar consumerism that was moving out of the cities and into the suburbs. A comic about the baby boom that depicted the children of that boom without any parental supervision, it appeared to be set in an idyll, a small world of little folks, concerned only with small things. Even at this moment before melancholy and disappointment became its primary characteristics, however, the strip was fundamentally concerned with how its characters found their way in the world, which, at least in part, involved acting as if they were adults. For parents, such autonomy might have resonated with the emerging, and concerning, category of the teenager, had that vision not been covered over with a façade of cuteness. That mask, moreover, was one of the many factors that caused adults to imagine themselves as characters in the strip. By investigating the way that the children in the strip imagined themselves as adults, we can see that the little world of Charlie Brown animated the feeling, as the midcentury political philosopher Hannah Arendt might have said, of being between past and future, of being an actor in a world that does not understand individual agents and over which those agents have no control.

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In May 1971, Charles Schulz introduced the character of Joe Cool into his comic strip *Peanuts*. Joe Cool joined a repertoire of other characters that Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy imagined himself to be, but in his second appearance the character distinguished itself from all the others. In the first panel, Joe Cool leans against Snoopy's doghouse, narrating that he's "hanging around the student union eyeing chicks." After Lucy walks by, he sits down and puts his sunglasses on his forehead, revealing his true identity and saying "We Joe Cools are scared to death of chicks."¹ In the context of the era's campus activism, Joe Cool seems like a relatively innocuous kind of college student. Too aloof to participate in any kind of political activity, his sensibility anticipates the reincarnation of the stock popular cool types from the 1950s, such as *Grease's* Danny Zuko and *Happy Day's* Arthur Fonzerelli, in the 1970s.

While Joe Cool is made out to be harmless in just his second appearance, both of the later characters start out as rebel-types but end up domesticated. The Fonz's arc is particularly notable because, after starting out as a sort of mildly dangerous, sexually promiscuous, leather jacket wearing, James Dean-type side character, he usurps the role of the show's moral center from Richie Cunningham's father in the show's *Father Knows Best* with teenagers pastiche. Schulz's participation in the nostalgia from an earlier era makes sense on its face; by the time Joe Cool appeared, the nation's economy was suffering from a combination of stagnation and inflation and the political climate was becoming increasingly tense, leading up to President Richard Nixon's eventual

¹ Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts*, May 28, 1971, in Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1971-1972*, 64; Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 180-181.

resignation. In *Grease*, *Happy Days*, and elsewhere, Americans began to turn towards the 1950s as a vision of a less stressful time. But Schulz's comic strip had first appeared at the beginning of that earlier decade and, through its use of children characters who seemed to behave like adults, critiqued the period it had become nostalgic for.

At its debut in the early 1950s, *Peanuts* reflected a crisis in the ideology of containment, a strategy designed keep both foreign and domestic enemies at bay. Although this crisis revealed itself in many ways, it did so prominently through an anxiety over class mobility in a postwar world of abundance and the moral panic over a perceived rise in the number of juvenile criminals. Schulz's innovation was to link these two; that the problems of anxious grownups came from the mouths of babes both mirrored and made light of the adult desire for self-fulfillment, available only through children and a suburban home. As a daily strip published in newspapers across the country that foregrounded aspects of midcentury culture nominally antithetical to containment, *Peanuts* revealed that, while attempting to protect children by reducing their exposure to criminality and sexuality in popular culture, the moral panic over youth culture in the 1950s actually failed to shield them from their parents' anxiety of existential inadequacy, a much more quotidian kind of end to innocence.

Yet Charlie Brown and his friends have a little world all their own, an autonomy to be envied in the age of the organization man. Thus, *Peanuts* presented the suburban idyll as being on both sides of the tracks: a kind of utopia for children, in which they take care of themselves and each other, but also a limiting and unfree place for parents that required constant work to pay for the constant consumption that enabled a fulfilling home

life. In this way, the strip is a challenge to the idea that the nuclear family in the suburban home could fulfill all of the needs of its occupants, child and adult. It is therefore of a kind with Sloan Wilson's *The Man In The Grey Flannel Suit* and on the same axis as expressions of the juvenile delinquency crisis like *Rebel Without a Cause*, as well on a similar wavelength with the kinds of philosophy, notably French existentialism, in vogue in America at that moment. Although a commentator on existentialism more than an existentialist herself, the political and culture philosopher Hannah Arendt captured this sort of public feeling when she referred to midcentury Westerners as existing suddenly in between past and future.² The characters in *Peanuts*, child characters taken up as representational of political subjects, were graphic evocations of just this point.

When Shermey, an early character who would eventually disappear from the strip, notes Charlie Brown's appearance in the very first *Peanuts* episode, he remarks "Here comes ol' Charlie Brown...Good ol' Charlie Brown" as his friend walks by and then, after the passage of another panel, "Oh, how I hate him!" In so doing, he announced not only Charlie Brown's wandering onto the scene, but also that of *Peanuts*; the light hearted possibilities of childhood soured by adult melancholy and darkness on display here would shortly become the strip's foremost characteristics, its humor and its eventual popularity both seeming to arise out of that marked contrast. From the first, Schulz was interested in putting his characters together and working out how they would react to what he called the "slight incident," the appearance of a crisis in the suburban ordinary,

² Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 7-15.

the sparse and modernist tableau on which the action of the strip plays out. Eventually, Schulz developed twelve genres of these slight incidents that that he relied on consistently: “the kite eating tree, Schroeder’s music, Linus’s security blanket, Lucy’s psychiatry booth, Snoopy’s doghouse, Snoopy himself, the Red Baron, Woodstock, the baseball games, kicking the football, the Great Pumpkin, and the little red-haired girl.” With the exception of the characters of Snoopy and Woodstock, each of these devices represents a source of threat, comfort, or both, symptomatic of a larger dissatisfaction with the way of *Peanuts*’s little world.³

Schulz was only able to identify these twelve gags when his strip reached maturity in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These later developments were built on the early indebtedness Schulz had to other cartoonists who had worked with child characters. A common setting in the early strips the end of a front walk (eventually replaced by the wall where Charlie Brown often chats with Linus), which Schulz admitted to copying from Percy Crosby’s 1923-1945 strip *Skippy*, modified from a curb to better suit his own, younger, characters.⁴ He also tried out gags in a similar style to other newspaper cartoonists; in the strip from November 10, 1951, Violet and Patty, having apparently been playing with Charlie Brown, tell him to “Go on home,” to “scram!,” before wondering in the next panel if “maybe we were too hard on him.” Patty says that she will go call him, which, standing in the open doorway, she does in the next frame. “Come back, Charlie Brown!... We’re sorry... We didn’t mean it!” Much to her surprise, and to

³ Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts*, October 2, 1950, in Charles M. Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1950-1952* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2004), 1; Brian Walker, *The Comics Since 1945* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 106.

⁴ Charles Schulz, *Peanuts: A Golden Celebration* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 15.

the reader's, Charlie Brown reappears, not from the outside, but instead from behind the open door; "I didn't think you did!," he tells Patty, whose head is turned all the way around, even though the rest of her is still facing the world outside. Patty's surprise is, therefore, the audience's.⁵

Here, Schulz was somewhat ineffectively aping Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy*. That strip, which debuted as *Fritzi Ritzi* in 1922 before shifting titles and protagonists in 1938, which features the titular little girl, her aunt Fritzi Ritzi, and other kids in her neighborhood, and is all about subverting the reader's expectations of its characters and their environment. In one strip, Nancy and her friend Sluggo, noticing a pleasing tune and wondering if the sound was coming from a music box, discover instead that the source is water from various leaks in the ceiling dripping into a number of pots placed on the floor. Inversion of power relations between characters is another common theme, as when Nancy puts a couple dozen pictures of herself on the wall in response to Fritzi Ritzi's admonition that children should be seen be not heard. Charlie Brown's reappearance from behind the door is a Bushmillerian touch, a rebalancing of power made possible by misusing a door as a hiding space rather than as a method of egress and emphasized by the slapstick of Patty's head turning all the way around. Although the latter element was never as strong in *Peanuts* as it was in *Nancy*, it remained in later strips as a way of

⁵ Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts*, November 10, 1951, in Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1950-1952*, 116. The strip may strike a twenty-first century reader as unusual because, by the late 1950s, Charlie Brown would have fixated being rejected, but at this moment in the strip's history he regularly gets the last laugh.

exaggerating disappointment or violence, as in the famous gag where Lucy pulls the football out from Charlie Brown just before he can kick it.⁶

When Schulz tried on other cartoonists's styles, he was tapping into the already established convention of what critic Charles Hatfield has called the comic strip child, less a realist depiction of childhood and more a kind of sign into which both adult and child meaning can be inserted. That trope originated in the very first American strips, such as Richard Outcault's 1895-1896 *Hogan's Alley*, which introduced American comics's first great character, an Irish urchin called the Yellow Kid. *Hogan's Alley* and its successor strips featured the unsupervised children of immigrant and working class parents from New York's slums engaging in adult activities like getting married and betting on dog, horse, and boat races, was designed to rile the city's upper classes, who often enjoyed cartoons that were less sympathetic to the lives of the people they encountered in neighborhoods they likely felt were much too close to their own. Moreover, the strip played into fears that children, due to industrialization and urbanization, were growing up too fast. Its emphasis on sport and the carnivalesque made light of psychologist G. Stanley Hall's assertion that children and adolescents should be drafted into activities that would prevent them from experiencing the adult world for as long as possible. Accordingly, *Hogan's Alley* appealed primarily to the working classes, who recognized themselves in the characters in the strip and subsequently purchased the merchandise emblazoned with the Yellow Kid's dirty, smiling visage. That figure

⁶ Ernie Bushmiller, *Nancy*, November 27, 1950 in Ernie Bushmiller, *Nancy Loves Sluggo: Complete Dailies 1949-1951* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2014), 214; Bushmiller, *Nancy*, November 4, 1950 in Bushmiller, *Nancy Loves Sluggo*, 207.

became the type character for what comics historian Bill Blackbeard calls the “demon child,” and which occurs regularly in this period, notably in strips like *The Katzenjammer Kids*.⁷

Winsor McKay’s *Little Nemo* appeared in 1905, at the vanguard of a genre strips that served as a significant contrast to Outcault and his imitators. McKay, who was an innovator both in comics and in animation, created a dreamscape for his main character that only resolved back into reality at the end of each strip, when Nemo was woken up, often by his mother. While *Hogan’s Alley* embodied the concerns that upper class adults had about poor and working class children, which eventually lead to a short moral panic over comic strips, *Little Nemo* and its cohort reflected both the sudden recognition of the importance of the inner lives of children and an increasing acceptance of comics as medium. Nemo’s mother, who wakes him in preparation for having to deal with the waking world, thus redrew the important boundary between adult- and childhood contravened by the inappropriately grown up play of the children in *Hogan’s Alley*, mitigating the danger the child presented to the adult world while reinforcing the suggestion that the child’s world was only somewhat accessible to adults.⁸

⁷ Outcault’s *Hogan’s Alley* follow up *Buster Brown* features a similar character from a middle class background, perhaps in an attempt to show that misbehavior among children was an issue across classes. R.F. Outcault, *R. F. Outcault’s the Yellow Kid : A Centennial Celebration of the Kid Who Started the Comics* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1995); 17, 39-41, 46; Bill Blackbeard and Martin Williams, *Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (Washington, DC, New York: Smithsonian Institution Press, Harry N. Abrams, 1977), 19; Charles Hatfield, “Redrawing the Comic-Strip Child: Charles M. Schulz Peanuts as Crosswriting,” in *Oxford Handbook of Children’s Literature*, ed. Julia Mickenberg and Lynne Vallone (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 169-170; Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: a History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004), 187-188.

⁸ Hatfield, “Redrawing the Comic Strip Child,” 169; Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 190.

The domestication of the comic strip child continued into the 1920s and 1930s in strips like Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* and Frank King's *Gasoline Alley*, the latter of which transitioned from being about cars when a baby boy in a basket appears on protagonist Walt Wallet's doorstep. These strips, like *Nancy*, feature unusual family structures, with a parental figure taking in a less fortunate child and then, particularly in Gray's strip, protecting them from other adults who might wish them harm. This theme reflects the growing notion, earlier picked up on by McKay, that childhood was worthwhile and that children should be allowed to remain so far as long as possible, while adding the conceit that such an extended period of youth required the adult protection.

The demon child, however, does not disappear during this period. Percy Crosby's *Skippy* debuted in newspapers in 1923 and ran through the mid 1940s. Crosby emphatically insisted that the child's world was in many ways their own. Even though Skippy's parents were common presences, they were distant authority figures, providing discipline and sustenance but with few characteristics separate from their function as parents. For Skippy, on the other hand, a burst pipe in the basement was an opportunity for play and the broom and tub are a boat rather than cleaning supplies. That the strip seems to take these interpretations at face value and the distance between the kid and his parents suggests that it is his world that is just as real as theirs. *Skippy* thus values the

child's world for its own sake in much the same way that *Little Nemo* did, except that that world and the waking world are one and the same.⁹

Crosby, who delineated both the child's little world and noted their tendency towards thoughtfulness, was a great, and admitted, influence on Schulz. But the latter's comic strip children are distinct from *Skippy* and the rest of their peer group even at this moment. While *Peanuts* would eventually allow Snoopy's fantasies to take shape in the form of Joe Cool and the Red Baron, none of the human characters had access to the kind of surreal imaginary that drove *Little Nemo*. Schulz's characters were often introduced as infants or toddlers and grew up into older children relatively quickly, at which point they stopped aging. *Gasoline Alley*'s characters, on the other hand, aged in more or less real time and its early child character, Skeeze, was a married adult by the time *Peanuts* debuted. Although we have already seen the strip's relation to gag comics like *Nancy*, *Peanuts* never devolved into that kind of constant, gleeful chaos. Perhaps most importantly of all, unlike *Gasoline Alley*, *Nancy*, *Skippy*, *Little Orphan Annie*, *Dennis the Menace* and others, the strip featured the characters' parents or guardians only as off panel presences, denied as much as a shadow if not yet entirely stripped of speech, in some ways aligning it most closely with *Hogan's Alley*.¹⁰ In these ways, it resisted both realist and surrealist impulses.

⁹Jerry Robinson and Percy Crosby, *Skippy and Percy Crosby* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 27, 44, 46.

¹⁰ Of those strips listed, only *Skippy* and *Dennis the Menace* feature adults who are actually the child protagonist's parents.

However, the sign of the comic strip child and its “funhouse mirror” quality was so potent, mediating ideas about childhood by taking them in, distorting them, and reflecting them back, that *Peanuts*’s peculiarities exaggerated rather than squashed its effect. Charles Hatfield notes that many of the earliest *Peanuts* strips pair the strip’s small, rounded figures at play with concerns about getting old rather than about growing up, about romantic relationships or getting married, about relating to the strip’s younger characters and so on. In order to prove this point, he points to a strip from 1950. Charlie Brown and Shermy stand underneath a sign, much taller than they, that reads “Watch out for children.” When, after three panels of looking, they do not see any, Charlie Brown says “Let’s leave... I don’t think any are coming.” This kind of humor was common in the strip’s first year or two, with the characters discuss aging, marriage, parenting and so on. Arising out of the dissonance between the kids’ small bodies and their outsized concerns, these punchlines are perhaps the clearest suggestion of Schulz’s own voice in strip that was, at least up to this point, more indebted to this history of the comic strip child than his later efforts. What emerged from these early punchlines, were children who thought and, perhaps acted, like adults.¹¹

Ultimately, the children of *Peanuts* were mimicking the anxieties emerged from distance between the expectations of fulfillment through abundance and the feeling of inadequacy that followed the failure to achieve that fulfillment. After the end of World War II, middle classness had become nominally more widely available through the GI Bill and the proliferation of suburbs, which enabled upward mobility through higher

¹¹ Hatfield in Mickenberg and Vallone, 170-173.

education and home ownership, respectively. Families attempted to buy into the middle class by buying a house in the suburbs and by consuming particular kinds of goods, both of which were enabled through the higher wages provided by college education.¹²

Far from being the promised end of the American dream, however, the suburban idyll was the source of a problem for the men of the era. Although depictions of them in popular culture, notably Robert Young's Jim Anderson in *Father Knows Best*, showed that they were masters of their domain and fonts of wisdom, many writers and social scientists saw the period's men as its least free. Whereas women were emancipated in the consumer paradise of the suburbs, men were beholden to their employers, to the companies with which they saw themselves, according to sociologist William H. White "in harmony." Whereas Americans had once been at the forefront of the cult of the individual, the growing feeling that one's workplace was a facet of one's identity had lead to a culture that continued to extol the individual even as it actually supported a kind of collectivism that frustrated "individual creativity" and ensured "the anonymity of achievement." Moreover, Americans had accepted this kind of opportunity because the move from the cities, which cut ties to kin and tradition that had before helped people to understand their place in the world, caused new suburbanites to feel rootless. Service to a corporation filled that empty space, but it did so in a way that seemed less authentic than previous kind of identities had. Even the leisure time made possible by the advances in technology and the New Deal-era gains of the labor movement was suspect, leading men

¹² Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 201-202; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 156-157.

to pick up hobbies so that they might be occupied with something other than the discontent that made those individuals who felt repressed by that system fight what appeared, at least in theory, to be working out quite well.¹³

Speaking to these anxieties was the midcentury vogue for French existentialism, notably that of Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and Albert Camus, who appeared in fashion magazines and news rags as well as the period's intellectual journals. The era's popular press saw these writers as the promoters of a kind of faddish pessimism, a feeling at odds with abundance and progress. Sartre seemed perhaps to agree, suggesting that Americans had not really experienced the reality of life and death during wartime and therefore lacked the ability to think about questions of existence in the same way. The widespread fear of the atom bomb, however, may have triggered similar existential questions. By the 1950s, a half decade after the only uses of nuclear weapons on people, schoolchildren were exposed to civil defense strategies like Duck and Cover and the nation's homemakers were drafted as the rear guard in the case of nuclear war, charged with maintaining home life as closely as possible even if the suburbs were annihilated. Still, that fear which made Americans double down on the culture of containment may also have made them feel quite small. Just as life under German occupation had freed Sartre, life under the shadow of the mushroom cloud may have encouraged midcentury Americans to seek freedom in the anxieties that oppressed them.¹⁴

¹³ William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1956), 5-7, 268; May, *Homeward Bound*, 124; Warren Susman, "Did Success Spoil The United States," in Larry May, ed., *Recasting America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 25-26.

¹⁴ George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); 93-95.

Readers saw *Peanuts* in explicitly existential terms. A 1956 article on Schulz in *The Saturday Evening Post*, which opened by discussing the role of failure in the cartoonist's success, related a story about his receiving a call from a young staffer in Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign who called him "the youngest existentialist." Schulz, for his part, professed not to know what an existentialist was, although he had heard of Sartre and the idea that "it is very difficult to be a human being and the only way to fight against it is to live an active life."¹⁵ Indeed, unlike his contemporary Walt Kelly, who eventually turned the funny animal characters in *Pogo* towards environmental satire, Schulz repeatedly denied that he was attempting to make some kind of political, philosophical or artistic impact with his cartooning. And, yet, the boys (and one dog) of *Peanuts* are consistently tilting at the windmill of the unachievable, not just attached to their fantasies but constituted entirely by their inability to achieve them. In this way, their activity towards their inability to succeed gave them life and made them recognizable and intelligible to adult readers.

The cultural attachment we have to *Peanuts*, however, would not have developed if its characters were merely intelligible. In his 1993 book *Understanding Comics*, American cartoonist and comics theorist Scott McCloud discusses the mechanics of cartooning, that is, abstracting a representation so that it is stylized but still clearly a drawing of a particular thing. The more abstract a cartoon is, he claims, the more possible it is for a reader to see his or herself in it. A cartoon, then, is "a vacuum into which our

¹⁵ Hugh Morrow, "The Success of an Utter Failure," in M. Thomas Inge, ed., *Charles M. Schulz: Conversations* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 8-9.

identity and awareness is pulled... an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don't just observe the cartoon," he concludes, "we become it."¹⁶

The history of the comic strip child, however, suggests that this kind of identification is less straightforward than McCloud claims. Cartoon abstraction, when used to depict children, competes with the fact that, to adults, real children often resemble the comic strip child, empty signs waiting to be filled with meaning. When drawn together by a cartoonist, the emptiness of the child as a type overcomes the emptiness of cartoon abstraction, and adult readers are unable to identify with such characters because they belong to their own little world. In the containment culture of the 1940s and 1950s, however, the hermeneutic openings provided by both the figure of the comic strip child and the identifications made possible by Schulz's sparse, modern cartooning meant that *Peanuts* enabled particular readers to do both at the same time. At a moment when parenthood appeared to be the means to self-fulfillment, *Peanuts* tempted adults—or at least men-- to see themselves as their own children.¹⁷

Although many of Schulz's twelve gags encouraged this impulse, notable among them is the famous football gag, wherein the neighborhood bully Lucy pulls the ball away from Charlie Brown just as he is about to kick it. After two immature versions of the gag in the early Fifties, the joke in its most recognizable form appeared in 1956. After enduring four years of abuse since the character's debut, Charlie Brown knows better

¹⁶ This is only true up to the point where an abstraction ceases to be representational. Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 36.

¹⁷ Hatfield, "Redrawing the Comic-Strip Child," 170-171.

then to expect that Lucy will hold the football for him and has to be enticed into doing it. “You just want me to come running up to kick that ball so you pull it away and see me kill myself!,” he says to her, only for her to offer him a million dollars, and then a hundred million dollars, if she pulls the ball away. “I must be out of my mind,” he replies, “but I can’t resist kicking footballs.” His inevitable, flying miss is dramatized across the first three panels of the Sunday strip’s bottom row, motion lines, but not the character himself, curving upward and crossing Lucy in the first one. Having pulled the football away, she shouts “HA!” so loudly that the sound is not contained by a word balloon. Following the motion lines as they suture the space between this panel and the next one, we find Charlie Brown up in the air before he finally crashes to the ground, “WHAM,” in the third panel of the row. Walking up to him in the next panel, Lucy pantomimes dropping the offered cash on his head, “Here’s your money, Charlie Brown,” before, in the penultimate panel of the strip, walking away laughing so hard that it again lacks the limits of a word balloon.¹⁸

Intriguingly, all of the panels within the strip are precisely the same size, rectangles taller than they are wide, six each in the bottom two rows, the only unusual panel being the one that bears the strip’s title and Schulz’s name in the first row. This is an example of what Thierry Groensteen calls a “regular” layout and which in Franco-Belgian comics is called the “waffle-iron.” By holding the panel design still, Schulz can emphasize other aspects of the strip, in this case the slapstick of pulling the football

¹⁸ Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts*, December 16, 1956, in Charles M. Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1955-1956* (Fantagraphics: Seattle, 2005), 308.

away. The waffle-iron also serves a rhetorical function, contributing to the sense that the action within the strip is itself regular. Similarly, the way that Schulz draws the eye across the action, it mostly flows from left to right, as the strip should be read, the only opposite direction movement, pushing back on the ease of reading, coming when Charlie Brown walks away from Lucy to take his dash at the ball and the motion lines that dramatize his crash to the ground in the third panel of the third row. The only particularly unusual compositional element is that in the third and second to last panels of the strip, a large portion of Charlie Brown's body is cut off by the limits of the frame, which shows only his head and the top portion of his body. His mouth is drawn in a humiliated smile as Lucy plays throwing money at his head and then disappearing entirely, before the strip's finale reveals all of Charlie Brown lying on the ground: "I think I'll just lie here until the first snow comes and covers me up..." That final phrase is the resolution of the disappointing and humiliating fall out of being tricked by his friend, of taking her at her word and being proven foolish for it, into the resignation suggested by the strip's regular layout. Having been promised either fulfillment or prosperity, Charlie Brown receives neither. The routinized disappointment of the football gag, however, is a profoundly confirming experience, a variety of cruel optimism seemingly covered over by the strip's exaggerated cuteness and its smallness of scale.¹⁹

¹⁹ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 95; Thierry Groensteen, *Comics and Narration*, trans. Ann Miller (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 43-44; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2. According to Berlant, "an optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person... risks striving." Perniciously, people find themselves bound "to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming." This "fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and

The strip's treatment of its girls is nowhere near as sympathetic. If the football gag mapped onto the noble struggle of men hoping to achieve in a world that had made success impossible, it did so through the agency little girl whose main role was as an antagonist for the strip's boys. Schulz, for his part, claimed that he chose to use Lucy in this way because it was funny, much more so than a little boy beating up on a little girl would have been. Likely, Schulz was correct, but in writing the strip this way, he condemned her, as well as Violet, Patty, and Charlie Brown's little sister Sally, to a life devoted to confounding the desires of *Peanuts's* male characters. Lucy, in particular, seems to take a particular glee from putting Charlie Brown down, and her characterization is reminiscent of that of women in general from Philip Wylie's 1942 bestseller *Generation of Vipers*. Writing in the midst of World War II, Wylie believed, among other things, that America had fallen under the influence of something he called momism; "Men live for her," Wylie wrote, "and die for her, dote upon her as they pass away." This devotion to mom was, he thought, a trick of Satan, who "taught gals to teach their men that dowry went the other way, that it was a weekly contribution, and that any male worthy of a Cinderella would also have to work like a piston after getting one." Mom, like, Lucy van Pelt, was thus the architect of man's misery, wearing him down from the vital and viral force he should have been into a sniveling yes man, stuck working a job to support her.²⁰

tableaux about how they and the world 'add up to something,'" an idea that she suggests amounts to nothing less than living "the good life."

²⁰ Hall, Mary Harrington, "A Conversation With Charles Schulz or The Psychology of Simplicity," in M. Thomas Inge, ed., *Charles M. Schulz: Conversations* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 45; Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1942); 186, 187. Lucy is actually a

Still, Charlie Brown appeared to be a self-fulfilling, if cruelly optimistic, suburban subject. What was appealing about him was the fantasy of a sustaining, perpetual innocence, the inversion of the power fantasies of both the comic book superhero and the era's notorious crime comics. This fantasy allowed suburban salary men, and their industrial counterparts, to overcome monotonous suburban life without having to turn into maniacs or sadists to do so. Charlie Brown thus represented the organization man's enthusiastic acceptance of a society that was not as fulfilling as perhaps it claimed to be and, indeed, critic Thomas Inge saw him as midcentury iteration of Charlie Chaplin's little fellow, "the seemingly inadequate hero" who emerges "in response to the overwhelming anxieties and insecurities of the technological society" caused at this later date by postwar abundance.²¹

If Charlie Brown seemed to be a complete and fulfilled midcentury suburbanite, however, there were also ways in which these qualities sublimated certain potentially disconcerting, perhaps even subversive, elements. The inbetweenness that first seems to sign the ultimate fulfillment of the midcentury ideal has a second resonance in the then-new category of the teenager.²²

That category arose out of the early twentieth in-between category of the adolescent, in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The adolescent itself had

much more ambivalent figure in the strips than what I've presented here; in some ways, her obstruction of Charlie Brown's desires may have represented a mode of resistance against containment culture from the suburban housewife that she stood in for. The character, and the girls of *Peanuts* more generally, deserve a more thorough and sympathetic treatment than what I am able to give them here.

²¹ Warren Susman, "Did Success Spoil the United States," 27-28; M. Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 105.

²² Hatfield, "Redrawing the Comic Strip Child," 172-174.

emerged in the wake of urbanization and industrialization as a way of clarifying the line between who was available to sell their labor and who was not; moreover, it was the moment at which it was possible to fix an individual's socialization for adulthood, either by schooling or by some other means. In between childhood and adulthood, then, was a stage when children began to look and act like adults but still needed to be under the surveillance of actual adult in order to ensure that they were able to join society in a productive way as citizens and, perhaps more crucially, laborers.²³

The adolescent, however, could not survive the crisis of the family that emerged as a result of World War II unchanged. With fathers in the military and mothers needed to facilitate wartime industry, it seemed possible that youth, who perhaps needed the most supervision, would be free to do as they pleased. Instead, parental surveillance was replaced with workplace surveillance, as the war vacuumed up as many resources, in terms of both commodities and labor, as were available. Still, the watchful eye of the manager was not the watchful eye of the parent, and working gave teens the capital they needed to enter the marketplace as consumers without the necessary condition that they place what they earned into the family pot. This newfound purchasing power allowed teens to turn around and spend as they please, and on what they pleased--cars, movies, rock records, and comic books--all of which brought them further from the home, closer to the sex and violence that were outside the suburban ideal (and, at least in the former case, also essential to it, when sanctified by marriage). Perhaps the most worrisome was

²³ Leerom Medovoi, *Rebels: Youth and the Cold War Origins of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 25.

the possibility teenagers might come together to enjoy these cultural productions and act out on the violent or sexual impulses that they might engender. Moreover, it seemed possible that the encounters white youths had with the children of the ethnic working class who had also moved out to the suburbs could have the opposite than intended effect of enabling these groups to create their own little worlds, marked by premature adulthood.²⁴

White, middle class teenagers thus began to look increasingly like the adolescents of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ethnic working class. Similarly, the gang of children in *Peanuts* is unsupervised, and therefore less resembles contemporaneous comic strip children like Nancy or Dennis the Menace and more the urban, immigrant “demon child” of the American comic strip’s early days (like the Yellow Kid and the Katzenjammer Kids), who menaced adults and participated in activities that would have been inappropriate for more middle class kids. The difference is that the behavior of the children in *Peanuts* seems to be tacitly approved of, or at least was seen as so harmless that actual parental intervention is extraordinarily rare, which suggests that the demands of suburban life in the era of containment culture that drove the adults of *Peanuts* to disinterest, mirroring, if incompletely, the way the Depression era family required children to assume some of the responsibilities of their parents. The transition between kinds of family life, and perhaps between kinds of family, was thus less complete than the suburban ideal suggested.

²⁴ Medovoi, 26, 30; James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 14-17.

In the absence of parents, the strip's older children seem to raise its younger characters, making explicit its evocation of nineteenth century family. Take, for instance a strip starring Schroeder that appeared in November 1951. The piano player, then still quite small and with a limited vocabulary, had already been established as a prodigy. In the strip's first panel, he plays a complicated series of notes on his plastic instrument, represented by a bar of musical notation, his eyes staring down at the keys, his tongue stuck out in concentration. In the second panel, he stops playing, having noticed Patty approaching from the left; he makes a noise that is some combination of frustration and surprise, signed by an exclamation point, his mouth is drawn into a slight, exasperated frown. In the next panel, he puts on a smile for Patty, and hits the same key repeatedly ("Plink Plink Plink"), in the manner of a more typical child playing with a toy piano. "Playing with your toy piano, eh Shroeder?," Patty says, "That's a nice boy... I'll leave so as not to bother you," and she does. Finally, Schroeder returns to playing, this stretch more complicated than the last one, his hand raised and ready to attack the keys in the manner of the virtuoso.

The reader, then, knows that Schroeder can play, even though Patty does not. This knowledge itself represents a striking inversion of expectations about toddlers with instruments, expectations that are mirrored in Patty's "that's a nice boy." Asking that we keep Schroeder's secret and delight in his talent, Schulz suggests that the joke is on Patty, a stand in for Schroeder's absent parents. Her dismissal of his plinking with "that's a nice boy" is the mimicking of a kind of parental authority that assumes that children's independent play is both safe and unserious. Moreover, the strip regularly asserts a kind

of mutual unintelligibility between adults and kids; Charlie Brown famously responds to meeting Schroeder by saying “I always feel so uncomfortable around children” and then, a few days later, notes that he “feel[s] like a father,” apparently believing he has taught that same infant to smile (although he does elicit a smile, it seems unlikely that it is the result of Charlie Brown’s encouragement).²⁵ The little world of *Peanuts* is made possible precisely by parents who lack a complex understanding or any real involvement in the lives of their children and in turn by those children emulating their parents.

This kind of parental play is reinforced, for example, by the July 18, 1952 strip, in which Charlie Brown, Patty and Lucy play house, taking on the role of the father, the mother and the little girl, respectively. In the strip’s second panel, both Charlie Brown, because he is reading the newspaper, and Patty, because she is washing dishes, ask Lucy to leave them alone, which causes her, in the third panel, to up and quit the game. “Why should I play something I have to go through everyday?!” she demands as she walks away.²⁶ More than just playing at parenthood, however, there are moments when parental responsibility actually seem to be transposed onto the children of *Peanuts*. Lucy herself is at an interesting nexus here, in some ways being parented by Charlie Brown as she begins to parent her little brother Linus. In her very early appearances, before she develops into a bully, Lucy menaces her unseen father, on one occasion wishing him goodnight from her crib, waiting until he has sat down in his chair and opened his newspaper before

²⁵ Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts*, November 8, 1951, in Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1950-1952*, 116; Schulz, *Peanuts*, May 30, 1951, in Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1950-1952*, 69; Schulz, *Peanuts*, June 1, 1951 in Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1950-1952*, 70; Hatfield, “Redrawing the Comic Strip Child,” 172.

²⁶ Schulz, *Peanuts*, November 8, 1952, in Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1950-1952*, 216.

requesting a “drink of water, pleeeeee.”²⁷ This is reminiscent of the gag from Lucy’s second appearance, just two weeks earlier, in which she asks Charlie Brown for a glass of water while he, too, is reading. Just as, a few months later, Charlie Brown will pantomime being her father by reading the newspaper and asking her to leave him alone, Lucy in turn reinforces her own role as child by asking Charlie Brown for a glass of water, in what became an apparently fruitful running gag for Schulz.

Eventually, as Lucy herself approaches Schulz’s version of adulthood, she begins to parent her own brother, in this case demonstrating the lack of understanding that older characters have for younger ones as a stand in for her mother’s authority. In a Sunday strip from June, 1953, Linus, still a baby and without speech, struggles to put one block on top of another in the comic’s first row, thinking to himself “I’d like to kick these blocks clear across the room!...I’d do it too, if I knew how to stand up...” He actually manages the task in the second row, and spends four panels marveling at his achievement, wondering if it had ever been done before, before Lucy comes along, picks up the blocks and puts them away because their mother wants their toys cleaned up. It is significant that we do not hear the command directly from their mother, whose voice appears occasionally in this period of the strip’s history and furthermore that Lucy is the one who relates it; there is no room for sympathy for Linus’s struggles or praise for his achievement, since he cannot communicate them and, anyway, they would appear small, both to his sister and their mother, even if he could.²⁸

²⁷ Schulz, *Peanuts*, March 4, 1952, in Schulz, *the Complete Peanuts: 1950-1952*, 164.

²⁸ Schulz, *Peanuts*, June 21, 1953, in Schulz, *The Complete Peanuts: 1953-1954*, 74.

This kind of mutual unintelligibility is key to the strip's vision of the autonomous child; although it suggests that one of the sources of the strip's early melancholy undertones is the inability of parents to understand a group of people supposedly essential to the constitution of the ideal of the nuclear family, it also suggests that child peer groups are essential in the face of absentee parenting (and perhaps the strip sees all parenting as absentee parenting). In the context that parenthood was supposed to be the fulfillment of the midcentury ideal of the family, of fears of "momism," that some mothers exert too much control over their children, potentially turning them into sissies, and that fathers might not be involved enough, Schulz joined a few voices suggesting that the right way to promote democratic citizenship was by giving those individuals in between childhood and adulthood as much autonomy as possible in order that they might flourish as democratic citizens. Still, the fear of the influence of other, suspect, children and mass media was strong and the apparent juvenile delinquency crisis that threatened the ideal family structure was blamed, at least in part, on the very popular American comic book.²⁹

In fact, comics are a significant, if not particularly common, feature of the early *Peanuts* strips, first mentioned almost two months into the strip's existence. In a parody of the importance of consumerism to adult courtship that resonates deeply with fears of momism, Shermy looks to Patty, who is faced away from him and asks "Don't you love me any more, Patty?," who replies "How's your comic-book collection coming?" When Shermy reveals that he had recently bought a few more, Patty turns to him, finally in the

²⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 73, 138-140. See also Medovoi, *Rebels*, 24-25.

last panel of the strip, and says “I love you madly!” From their first mention, then, comic books contribute to the in-betweenedness of Schulz children, another medium through which their unclear status could be expressed. In the October 5, 1951 strip, for example, Shermy, Patty and Charlie Brown find the comic books in the local drugstore, and read for long enough that Charlie Brown declares “If this druggist was any kind of a guy, he’d put in benches!” Here, aside from a cameo by a *Nancy* comic, the titles are limited to the relatively innocuous “SLAM,” “BANG,” “POW,” and so on, which suggest a cartoonish violence.

This slight violence, and worse, permeated the comic book industry at a moment when superheroes had lost popularity in favor of the grotesque and the lurid. This phenomenon led to a moral panic, an aspect of a larger juvenile delinquency crisis, that historians have called the great comic book scare. A significant figure in that movement was the psychologist and author Frederick Wertham, who in 1954 published a book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, which excoriated the comic book industry. In it, he claimed that comics, particularly crime comics like *Crime Does Not Pay* and horror comics like *Tales From the Crypt*, contributed to the culture of juvenile delinquency by introducing children and teens to violent or antisocial behaviors that contravened ideal postwar sources of authority.³⁰

In the chapter “Design for Delinquency,” Wertham lays out the case for the connection between crime comics and the growth in juvenile crime. Many of those young people who did drift into delinquency, he said, did so because they were lacking in adult

³⁰ Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage*, 91-92.

support. Instead, he suggests, they turn to crime comics for their education, which lead them to commit the kind of violence and sadism depicted in such books. Noting the same problem of suburban life which enabled the autonomous little world of *Peanuts*, Wertham links these crimes to the “unprotectedness” of children, stating the he had found that “in every delinquent child that at one time or another he had insufficient protection...the time when children in the mass are most defenseless, when they are most susceptible to influences from society at large, is in their leisure hours. And children’s leisure is on the market.” Wertham thus took aim at the idea of the autonomous and valid child’s world, implicitly denying the premise of *Peanuts*. Schulz also contributed to this debate, and suggested that, contra Wertham, children could be trusted with a world of their own, and therefore with comic books, whatever their content.³¹

By the next April, Schulz seems to be more specifically responding to Wertham and his cohort in a Sunday strip. Charlie Brown walks into the druggist’s, says that he’s “discouraged” and that “a comic magazine is the only thing that will revive” him. In the next panel, facing away from the reader and towards a rack of comics marked “For The Kiddies,” Charlie Brown famously declares “What a gory layout!” And, indeed, Schulz has upped the violence in the comics, graduating from the innocuous to titles like “MANGLE,” “SLAUGHTER,” “THROTTLE,” and “JAB”— and that’s just the first row. As Charlie Brown flips through the rack, from “TERROR COMICS” to “MURDER COMICS,” he enacts some minor violence, tearing the cover off one, climbing up on the rack and knocking all of them, including “GASP COMICS” and “TERROR FUNNIES,”

³¹ Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1954), 149, 155-156.

onto the floor, before buying just one comic book. Leaving, he looks back towards the drug store and says of the druggist “boy did he ever glare at me! He probably isn’t feeling well...”³²

This particular strip is unusual in its level of detail; even other strips set in commercial settings are much more sparsely drawn than the druggist’s here. In part, this is because Schulz had more room to work with on a larger Sunday strip like this one. Even more than that, it seems that this strip is drawn from an unusually high up perspective almost as if, except for the first panel and the last one, it is the view of the druggist himself, which explains the very rare instance where a *Peanuts* character is facing into the frame rather than out of it. That the children of *Peanuts* consume such comics is therefore not a coincidence. The fact that these strips are some of the few from this period that feature the characters entering that world in some way doubles the in-betweenness of the characters; it is not that they do not have access to the adult world, it’s just they have it through the media rather than their parents. Even so, Charlie Brown seems unusually like a regular child. Schulz takes the premise of *Seduction of the Innocent*, that children need protecting, and turns it on its head; here, only the druggist’s wares need protection from the child’s misbehavior. Far from suggesting that such comics be banned, he seems to be saying that the worst a kid, perhaps even a teen, reading such comics could get up to was a little childish misbehavior— not inappropriate for a body that was not yet an adult one. Charlie Brown’s little world, and the real world it stood in for, had larger problems

³² Schulz, *Peanuts*, June 22, 1952, in Schulz, *the Complete Peanuts: 1950-1952*, 205.

In the context of *Peanuts*, Wertham's plea that someone step up to protect America's youth from themselves was also a plea for suburbanites to take up the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood, which they were perhaps shirking. Although on different sides of the question of juvenile delinquency, Schulz and Wertham both seemed to be suggesting that there were elements of postwar containment culture that were infantilizing for the adults who willingly participated in them. In some ways, this is because, as Hannah Arendt noted, they were a group who felt temporally adrift, caught between past and future in a fissure opened by the explosion of the atomic bomb. They were also felt disenfranchised by social, work and family structures they were committed to because those structures constituted them. *Seduction of the Innocent* was Wertham's attempt to bring American parents, who proclaimed that children were key to their fulfillment, out what he perceived as a kind of midcentury malaise. *Peanuts*'s critique was much more subtle, and in some ways suggested that the only way out of the dilemma was to lean into it.

Happiness, in this reading, is the knowledge that there are no parents around. If *Peanuts* traffics in both the startling autonomy of childhood and the striking unfreedom of the middle class family man, it is no wonder that people remember it so fondly. Although there are other reasons that the strip has come to sign childhood, related to how the property developed as an empire beginning with the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special* in 1964, what stuck in the memory of the early readers of *Peanuts* was not the explication of suburban adulthood; it was the way that it celebrated the autonomy of children. But the absence of parents cut both ways. Even as it allowed children to be free,

it also left them feeling adrift, without recourse to what had come before or knowledge of what was yet to come.

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